

STAFF REPORT

AGENDA ITEM: Oceano Dunes District Program Overview

STAFF: Andy Zilke, District Superintendent
Brent Marshall, Chief Ranger
Ronnie Glick, Senior Environmental Scientist
Dena Bellman, Park & Recreation Specialist

DATE: October 14, 2011

The following provides an overview of the Oceano Dunes District, including areas such as trends in park visitation, visitor services, resource management, education and interpretation, marketing, concessions, and facility improvements.

CREATION OF THE PARK

In 1974, the Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) completed a General Development Plan for Pismo State Beach and Pismo Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA). (Note – Pismo Dunes SVRA was later re-named Oceano Dunes SVRA.) The Plan was approved in 1975 by the State Park and Recreation Commission which authorized the various recreational uses of both parks.

Park Overview

Oceano Dunes SVRA is located on California's Central Coast in San Luis Obispo County, within the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes complex. The SVRA is bordered on the north by the cities of Grover Beach and Pismo Beach, on the east by the community of Oceano, on the south by Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge, and on the west by the Pacific Ocean.

Oceano Dunes' topography includes an active dune complex (shifting sand) that is geologically unique and was first documented by the early Spanish explorers on their way up the California coast. The sand that formed these dunes was carried down to the ocean by rivers and streams, deposited on the beach by ocean currents, and then shaped by the wind into the dunes seen today in a process that is still ongoing.

Archaeological excavations in the area surrounding the park have uncovered artifacts dating back at least 11,000



years ago, allowing archeologists to establish the time frame this area was occupied by Northern Chumash, one of the oldest tribes in California. These areas are protected from disturbance from park visitors but evidence of their presence may be seen in several locations in the dunes in the form of “middens,” which are piles of shells left after the Chumash collected shellfish for food.



The first documentation of motorized vehicles being operated on the beach was a 1906 newspaper article announcing that Ford Motor Company was meeting in Pismo Beach for a rally between California’s northern and southern car dealerships. Early photos depict families enjoying the beach and dunes in horse drawn carriages and on bicycles.

Today, the sand dunes’ distinctive features provide for a unique recreational opportunity for visitors to participate in motorized recreation on several miles of beach and coastal sand dunes. The SVRA has been a favorite camping and recreation site for families for over 100 years.

General Park Information

The Oceano Dunes District operates Oceano Dunes SVRA, Pismo State Beach, and the Pismo Dunes Natural Preserve. All three units are contiguous with one another.

Oceano Dunes SVRA consists of 3600 acres of sandy beach and coastal dunes. 1500 acres are open to off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation and camping.



Approximately 2100 acres is closed to OHV recreation, but open to various non-motorized recreational opportunities. Pismo State Beach consists of approximately 1400 acres of sandy beach and coastal dunes which includes approximately 720 acres of the Pismo Dunes Natural Preserve.

In addition to motorized recreation, Oceano Dunes SVRA provides a wide array of other non-motorized recreation opportunities

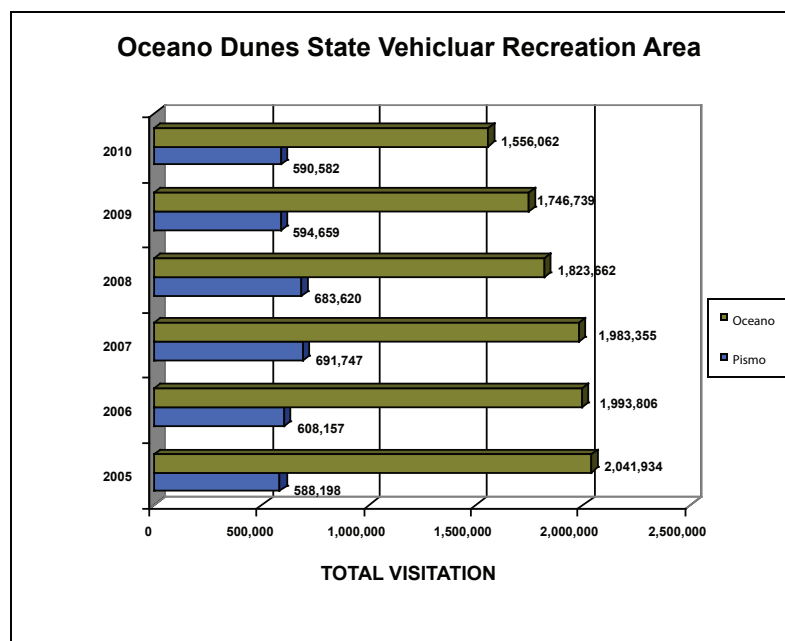
including but not limited to hiking, nature walks, horseback riding, kite surfing, and bird-watching. In the south end of the SVRA is the Oso Flaco Lakes area. This area consists of two freshwater lakes on the edge of the dune complex. Visitors to the Oso Flaco area can enjoy a moderate walk along the one-mile Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible boardwalk, observing wildlife and native plants as the path passes Oso Flaco Lakes area, leading out to the beach. This area is an important stopover for waterfowl traveling along the Pacific Flyway.

Visitation

In 2010, annual attendance at Oceano Dunes SVRA was nearly 1.6 million visitors. With its primitive beach and dune camping, the SVRA is the most popular camping destination in all of State Parks. The park has a 1000 vehicle per night camping limit, and a day use limit of 4300 vehicles. These limits were established through a 1982 Coastal Development Permit and four subsequent Permit Amendments to operate the park in the Coastal Zone.

With nearly 600,000 visitors in 2010, Pismo State Beach is also a popular camping destination for OHV enthusiasts. Located close to the Grand and Pier Avenue entrances to the SVRA, Pismo State Beach has two developed campgrounds - Oceano and North Beach – which have a total of 174 developed campsites offering conventional amenities such as picnic tables, restrooms, fire rings, and 40 hook-up sites.

Attendance at the SVRA peaked in 2005 with over 2 million visitors. In each year since 2006 the annual attendance has dropped. Rising fuel costs and other economic factors have played a role in the decline. Also, park attendance in 2010 was affected by severe winter storms, particularly during December, causing coastal flooding and temporary closure of the park.



INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

Senate Bill 742, enacted in 2008, provided the opportunity for Oceano Dunes District to hire a State Park Interpreter. In 2009, an Interpreter was hired along with three to five seasonal interpretive specialists. The District began offering Jr. Ranger and Campfire programs. In 2010, 626 children attend the Jr. Ranger programs, while 1,125 park visitors attend campfire programs. Jr. Ranger programs are typically held Thursday through Saturday beginning the middle of June through Labor Day weekend. Campfire programs are held intermittently throughout the year on holiday weekends, but consistently on Friday and Saturday evenings beginning the middle of June through Labor Day Weekend.



In addition to the traditional interpretive programs, staff created two popular park specific programs. Every Saturday throughout the year, interpretive staff offer “roving” interpretation at Oso Flaco Lake. As park visitation increases, roving interpretation is offered in other areas of the park as well. 1,162 visitors were entertained at the interpretive booths throughout the parks in 2010. In addition to the roving interpretation, during the summer months when visitation is the highest, Summer Discovery Day, offers a different, exciting topic that highlights a natural or cultural piece of the park.

In 2010, the park staff was more visible at community events such as the Grover Beach Holiday Parade, where they have won 1st place in their class for the past three years, at the San Luis Obispo Farmers Market, Pismo Beach Clam Festival, and other community events.

The park offers free tours and school programs for schools in San Luis Obispo County, as well as any class that visits the park. Tours in the Monarch Butterfly Grove, the Nature Center, and Oceano Lagoon are available. Additionally, park staff conduct programs at the schools using a variety of natural and cultural learning tools. Over 1,808 children participated in these educational programs in 2010.



The Central Coast Natural History Association is a cooperating association that functions both in San Luis Coastal District and the Oceano Dunes District of State Parks. These docents and volunteers are an integral part of the park’s ability to offer tours and educational programs in the park. Although they predominantly conduct the programming at the Monarch Butterfly Grove, the Nature Center, and Oceano Lagoon,



many of the docents offer specific hikes and programs in the dunes and at Oso Flaco Lake on topics such as the Dunites, Chumash, and Don Gaspar de Portola's expedition.

The new interpretive trailer provides another means to reach the public. With its versatility and ability to house and display museum-quality props, and to provide shelter and a wind break, the trailer allows park staff

to spend more time at the SVRA thus increasing the opportunity and potential for interpretation and education programs in all venues.

PUBLIC SAFETY PROGRAMS

Public safety is extremely important at the Oceano Dunes District. In addition to public safety contacts to ensure safe and responsible operation of vehicles, visitor services staff are also available to respond to medical emergencies.

Operating a district as complex as Oceano Dunes is similar to managing a small town. Maintaining an effective public safety program requires a significant amount of effort to maintain legally mandated levels of staff proficiency.



Within the District are a number of certified instructors who provide training to staff. Oceano Dunes instructors are in high demand because of their high levels of proficiency and experience. They also teach at the Department's ranger academy and provide training to local allied agencies. Training topics include; firearms, defensive tactics, emergency medical responder, scenario evaluator, sound testing, ATV safety, and rescue techniques.

ATV Rider Safety

As part of a Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division-wide effort to promote and improve safety for ATV operators, Oceano Dunes SVRA has developed an ATV Safety Training Program in the District. A secure training site was created within the SVRA in 2009. The District purchased



training vehicles and equipment, and park aid staff trained by ASI as Instructors, began providing training classes in 2010. Comprehensive ATV safety education programs provide an important opportunity to educate the public on safe and responsible use of OHVs and raise awareness of the park resources.

Volunteer Assistance

Volunteers provide a valuable and vital addition to the park's public service staff. During 2010, off-highway patrol volunteers contributed nearly 1650 hours of service with public safety contacts, special events, and emergency response. The volunteer program continues to grow with 22 active members making pre-emptive safety and informational contacts regarding park rules and regulations.

Volunteers also assist with medical aid and scene control under staff supervision. The volunteer program operates with one dedicated utility vehicle, two ATVs, and volunteer's private vehicles. Volunteer training also continues with safety, regulatory, and park operations components to keep volunteers well trained and informed.

Lifeguard Program

Surfing, boating, operating personal water-craft, kiteboarding, and paddling are some of the recreational watersports available at Oceano Dunes SVRA. Since motorized activity is allowed on the beach, those accessing the water for recreational purposes can park their vehicles and easily unload gear near the water's edge. In addition to the seasonal lifeguards who work at the park, a permanent lifeguard position was recently added to the staff at Oceano Dunes SVRA. During this past summer season, lifeguards responded to 57 aquatic rescues and numerous medical calls. One rescue in particular gained public appreciation when three of the seasonal guards rescued five victims from a rip current.



K-9 Program

Oceano Dunes SVRA has one of two canine teams in the OHMVR Division. Rangers with canine partners are able to provide a unique response to public safety issues. The presence of a trained canine and handler often serves to de-escalate situations quickly, providing a safe and productive exchange for both officers and the public. The K-9 team of "Nate and Kota" are an excellent addition to any public contact. The team contributes to a wide variety of activities including community outreach, routine public safety contacts, drug searches, and assisting allied agencies in apprehending felony suspects.

RESOURCE PROGRAM

Habitat Monitoring System

Oceano Dunes SVRA, like all of the SVRAs, conducts annual Habitat Monitoring System (HMS) monitoring that includes surveys of vegetation, shoreline birds, terrestrial birds, and herpetological resources. Surveys are also conducted periodically for small and large mammals. The HMS surveys are vital to understanding the long term status and trends of sensitive plant and animal populations. In the ten plus years of HMS monitoring, park staff have been able to track the population trends of sensitive plant species like the beach spectaclepod (*Dithyria maritima*) and the surf thistle (*Cirsium rhothophilum*). Similarly, the HMS surveys have provided valuable information on the trends of shorebird species that use the beach and estuarine habitats within the park. This HMS information is vital to effectively managing plant and animal populations while providing for recreational opportunities at the park.

Habitat Conservation Plan

One of the long term goals for the SVRA is a multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to cover all park operations under the State and Federal Endangered Species Acts. This HCP will outline specific management and monitoring activities to address covered species, including western snowy plover, California least tern, California red-legged frog, tidewater goby, and numerous listed plant species. The HCP will help guarantee existing recreational programs can continue at the park and could result in additional recreational opportunities during the plover and tern breeding season.

Plover and Tern Nesting Program

Each year, from March 1 – September 30, Oceano Dunes SVRA closes off approximately 300 acres of the park to provide nesting habitat for the federally listed threatened western snowy plover and the state and federally listed endangered California least tern. A large complement of environmental scientists and seasonal staff monitor the area on a daily basis to track nesting activity, predator activity, nest success, and chick survival.



The nesting area is fenced with a 6 foot tall predator proof fence that is maintained throughout the nesting season. Resource staff implement a number of habitat enhancement efforts to improve nesting conditions for the plover and tern including; placing large woody debris, placing wood chips, adding surf cast kelp (wrack), installing native plants, and enhancing food resources in

the nesting area on the sand. Resource staff monitor nesting behavior seven days per week and during most daylight hours. Chicks are given a unique color band combination to allow monitors to track the chicks. One critical piece of information that is collected at Oceano Dunes SVRA is a count of the chicks reaching fledge age, the age at which the chicks can live independently.



From 2005 – 2011, Oceano Dunes SVRA averaged 38 breeding pairs of California least tern. During this same time period, Oceano Dunes SVRA produced an average of 44 fledged chicks per year. The park produced more than one fledged chick per breeding pair, providing for strong population growth of this endangered species. In addition, the park produced more than half of all the California least tern chicks to reach fledge age in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties.

From 2005 – 2011, Oceano Dunes SVRA also averaged 115 breeding adult western snowy plover. The park produced an average of 82 fledged chicks per year over this time period producing more than one fledged chick per breeding adult male, for a strong population growth for this threatened species.

Restoration Program

Every year, Oceano Dunes SVRA implements a restoration project to control sand movement and maintain the habitat values of the vegetation islands located within or adjacent to the open riding area of the park. Over time, these islands become inundated with shifting sands. Since 2004, the park has restored approximately 140 acres of actively eroding sand dune. Staff manage an active greenhouse operation that produces an excess of 20,000 plants per year to plant in restoration areas.



Some recent restoration efforts include the “40 Acre Wood” restoration project where 28 acres of active sand sheet was revegetated with native dune species. This project helps to control the movement of sand into Oso Flaco Lake. Other restoration projects have been completed at the Boy Scout, Maidenform, Table Top, and Pipeline vegetation islands. Monitoring plots are being established in these restoration areas to demonstrate the success of these projects and the recovery of these restored areas to support the full complement of native plant species.

The restoration techniques developed at Oceano Dunes SVRA have been adopted at other sites within the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dune System and at other coastal dune systems in the state.

Invasive Exotic Weed Control Program

The single greatest threat to habitat viability at Oceano Dunes SVRA is the spread of invasive exotic vegetation throughout the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dune System. Two invasive exotic grasses (veldt grass and European beachgrass) are widespread and are continuing to impact habitats throughout the SVRA. These two weeds aggressively displace native plant species in foredune, dune scrub, and dune swale habitats. These invasive grasses are widespread throughout the dune system. Staff has been working with partner agencies and adjacent public landowners to control large infestations of invasive exotic species throughout the dune complex. The most significant effort to control invasive exotic species is in the south end of the park at Oso Flaco dunes where approximately 160 acres has been treated annually for two years to control the spread of European beachgrass. Weed control activities include herbicide application, hand removal of target weeds, and prescribed fire.



The restoration and weed control programs at the park are vital to the long term preservation of habitats and the unique flora and fauna in the park. Restoration activities can help reduce the spread of invasive exotic species and invasive control efforts can help restoration projects succeed.

Water Quality

Water quality has been identified as a significant issue in Oso Flaco Lake. It should be noted that the water quality issues at Oso Flaco are not a result of OHV recreation. Oso Flaco Lake, and many other water bodies in the state, are subject to upstream uses that can degrade water quality.



The Lake drains a small watershed that is dominated by irrigated agriculture. Monitoring by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board had demonstrated significant issues with bacteria levels, nutrient levels, and pesticides. The Lake is listed as an impaired water body and is subject to a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) regulation dealing with a host of water quality impairments.

In 2009, the District contracted with the Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District to monitor water quality in the lake; paying particular emphasis on turbidity,

sediment loading, and nutrient loading. The multi-year effort complements the water quality monitoring being conducted by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board and agricultural interests in the Oso Flaco watershed. This water quality monitoring has been conducted for more than one year and has produced some interesting results regarding nutrient and sediment loading into the Lake. Large loads of sediment have been recorded moving into the Lake during large storm events. However, sediment loads have also been documented during low flow periods. Similarly, nutrient loading has been estimated during low flow periods. These loading calculations have recorded many tons of nitrogen moving into this water body on a weekly basis. The information gained from the water quality monitoring activities will assist the District in making management decisions and responding to the new water quality regulations.

Fish Surveys

Park staff conducts fisheries surveys of Arroyo Grande Creek on a quarterly basis to document trends of native fish populations. These surveys have recorded important trends in species like the federally-listed endangered tide-water goby and the threatened steelhead trout.



Air Quality

In September 2011, the Air Pollution Control District (APCD) produced a draft Fugitive Dust Rule that outlines steps that must be taken by State Parks to reduce the PM-10 emissions. The Draft Rule includes monitoring requirements, a timeline for implementation of projects, and other reporting requirements. The executive summary to the pilot project study and the draft Fugitive Dust Rule was presented to the public at a stakeholder meeting in September 2011,

and to the APCD Board for review and comment on September 28, 2011. State Parks provided comments to the APCD Board at that meeting. The final Rule is scheduled to be heard by the APCD Board at its regular meeting in November 2011.



For a full discussion of the events leading to the decision of the APCD to issue a Draft Rule, please refer to the separate staff report on this issue included with the commission meeting materials.

MARKETING

In fall of 2010, the District began developing marketing strategies and an implementation plan for the Oceano Dunes District. The District identified the need to increase public knowledge of the operations and functions of the parks, as well as change perception and behavior of the park visitors.

In October 2010, the SVRA entered into a collaborative project with the San Luis Obispo County Business Improvement District (CBID) to shoot virtual tour photography in the parks that would be used both on the CBID and State Parks OHMVR Division website. The project was completed in May 2011 and the virtual tour is currently available to experience on the OHMVR Division website. The tour is an exciting historical look at the parks, and provides a wonderful opportunity to share this unique resource with the visitors, legislature, local investors, businesses, and tourists.



The most aggressive undertaking thus far has been the creation of the Mobile Marketing Program. It consists of a 24-foot marketing trailer that houses five exhibits. Through the strategic planning sessions, park staff determined four topical areas of messaging, around which the exhibits were created; Respect the Land, Natural Hazards, Laws and Safety, and Rider/Driver Safety. Each of these exhibits includes eye-catching photography and visual effects, interactive media messaging and video, and strategic information and messaging that furthers the parks' marketing strategies and goals.



The Mobile Marketing Project was a District-wide collaboration of efforts, and has received many accolades from businesses and OHV communities. Nearly 4500 people enjoyed the exhibit at the Mid-State Fair in Paso Robles, in July 2011, and nearly 6000 visitors were entertained by the exhibits at the Sand Sport Super Show, in Costa Mesa, in September 2011. The succinct messaging, interactive media, and the ability to adapt and update the messaging with minimal additional effort or cost is part of the longevity of the Program. A key partner, Friends of Oceano Dunes, helped create and/or locate video, photography, props, and donations for the Mobile Marketing exhibits and travel expenses.

Future marketing projects currently in the development stages include updating the radio station messaging and format, updating the Safety Education Center, the creation of Self-Guided Tour Brochures that will highlight the natural, cultural, and historic locations and tales of the Oceano Dunes and Pismo State Beach. These tours will also be available on the Oceano Dunes website.



CONCESSIONS

The District administers 10 concession contracts: Fin's Restaurant and Pismo State Beach Golf Course; five OHV rental contracts; a mobile sewer pump-off contract; a dune tour contract; an RV camping trailer rental contract; and, a beach towing contract. Each concession operation provides very popular services to the visiting public. Rent to the state in 2011 for the concession contracts totaled approximately \$420,000. Gross receipts for the concession operations in the parks totaled approximately \$5.2M.

The five OHV rental contracts the Commission approved to move forward, recently went out to bid and have been reviewed by an Award Board appointed by the Department Director. The results of this process will soon be released.

Lodge and Conference Center Project

In 1982, an amendment to the Pismo State Beach/Pismo Dunes SVRA General Development Plan authorized the lodge project, and Public Resource Code, Section 5003.02.1 authorized a lodge and conference facility on state owned property within Pismo State Beach adjacent to the Grand Avenue entrance to the beach, and an Operating Agreement or Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) between the state and the city to accomplish the project. State Parks subsequently entered into a JPA with the City of Grover Beach to develop the project. A concession contract to build the lodge and conference facility was awarded to Pacifica Companies in 2010. An Environmental Impact Report has been completed for the project, but additional project modifications have been proposed that will have to be approved by the state and city. The next step in the process is to obtain a Coastal Development Permit through the California Coastal Commission. Construction is planned to begin in the later part of 2012. The state (OHV Trust Fund) and the city will receive a share of the concession monthly rent and a share of the monthly Transient Occupancy Tax revenue once the lodge and conference facility commence operation.

ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY

Strategic Marketing Group (SMG) was contracted in early 2010 to conduct an Economic Impact Analysis and Study for the Oceano Dunes SVRA. The final report will be released in late October/early November 2011. Included are the Project Objectives and Executive Summary submitted by Carl Ribaudo, CEO.

Project Objectives:

1. Collection of information regarding Oceano Dunes SVRA visitors, including point of origin, reason for visiting, length of stay and monies spent.
2. Measurement of the direct and indirect economic and employment impact of the Oceano Dunes SVRA on the San Luis Obispo County economy.

Executive Summary:

- The majority of respondents were White (71%), and a significant minority (22%) were Hispanic.
- Survey respondents were more likely to be married (60%). Significantly more men participated in the survey than women (76% and 24%, respectively).
- The average age of survey respondents was 37 years, with the median age at 35.9 years.
- The average household income of survey respondents was \$88,000.
- Almost all respondents lived in California (96%), and a significant percentage of these were from Southern California.
- 12% of respondents identified themselves as local residents, residing in San Luis Obispo County. Another 16% indicated they were day visitors from outside of San Luis Obispo County and 72% indicated they were overnight visitors from outside of San Luis Obispo County.
- 76% of the overnight visitors from outside San Luis Obispo County said they camped overnight in the SVRA (on the beach /campgrounds) on their last trip.
- The average length of stay of all respondents was 3.1 nights.
- The average party size of all respondents was 13 people.
- A full two-thirds (66%) of all respondents had children between the ages of 0 and 17 in their immediate Group, suggesting they believe the available activities are suitable for and have interest to family groups.
- Survey respondents were specifically asked if they would still visit San Luis Obispo County if the Oceano Dunes Park was not in existence. Two-thirds (67%) said they would not.

- Overall travel spending for all visitors to the Park during their visits was approximately \$1,544 per travel group.
- Survey respondents were asked how much of their total group expenditure was spent inside the Park itself; the average portion was \$235, representing 15% of an immediate travel party's total trip expenditure.
- Overall Economic Impact is estimated to be \$171M (Direct + Indirect + Induced Spending). Total economic impact by day visitors is estimated to be \$10.6M and overnight visitor impact was \$160.9M.

Commission Action: No action at this time, information only.